

Series II
Subjects Files,
1916-1973

Box 15, Folder 12

Battle of Surigao
Strait by R.W. Bates,
1947, discussion with
ADM Hill Gen
Gruenther,...

0324

BATTLE OF THE SURIGAO STRAITS

by

Captain Richard W. Bates

(21 March 1947)

DISCUSSION

Capt Bates
CAPTAIN BATES: Gentlemen, I am not selling any book, but this one was sent to me by Admiral Kinkaid the other day. (Captain Bates held up the Battle of Leyte Gulf by Mr. Vann Woodward) I can already see some mistakes in it--it was written by a Mr. Vann Woodward, who is a historian at Johns Hopkins. Someone gave him all the secret stuff on the Battle, and with that, he has written a very interesting book. The fact that Admiral Kinkaid sent it to me, indicates it meets with his approval. I haven't read it--only glanced through it--but I find it is highly interesting.

CAPTAIN EVENSON: Before we start, I would like to ask a question, if I may. If Admiral Kurita of the Central Force had decided to come on into Leyte Gulf, before the engagement with the escort carriers, remember, they had four battleships, ten cruisers and a number of destroyers still left in fighting shape--what chance would the Seventh Fleet have had in successfully blocking them.

CAPTAIN BATES; I think we would have had quite a good chance if we had gotten in close enough. I talked to Admiral Hill about that last night. Our destroyers in the Strait fired 140 torpedoes. There were twenty destroyers which fired torpedoes and these destroyers had ten torpedoes each--a total of 200. So

0325

there were only sixty torpedoes left in those ships, but Desdiv X-ray didn't fire any. That meant there were sixty more torpedoes available. So we had 120, or approximately half of the torpedoes available. Admiral Kinkaid had some destroyers with him and he sent them over to help us on the 25th. We had already estimated that the enemy might come down, and we had therefore placed our forces across Surigao east, in a very similar plan to what we had in Surigao Strait south, except we ran at higher speed. We had taken some of the destroyers and put them out on both flanks against the shore, with the expectation of launching destroyer attacks in a similar manner to the earlier battle, except that in this case it would be daylight. The destroyers, in this case, would have to carry their torpedoes in much closer than in the night action to insure hitting. In the night action, the Japs couldn't tell whether our destroyers had fired or not. In the daytime you can tell.

CAPTAIN EVENSON; How were the battleships fixed for armor-piercing ammunition?

CAPTAIN BATES: I have a sheet, of reasonable accuracy, made up out of their reports. When we went into Surigao, the MISSISSIPPI had 201 rounds; the MARYLAND, 240; the WEST VIRGINIA, 200; the TENNESSEE, 396; the CALIFORNIA, 276; the PENNSYLVANIA, 360. The MARYLAND and the WEST VIRGINIA were armed with eight 16 inch guns; the other battleships were armed with twelve 14 inch guns. The MISSISSIPPI fired one salvo of twelve 14 inch guns; the MARYLAND fired six salvos. All ships did not fire full salvos.

0326

Some of the ships fired partial salvos. In some cases, one or more guns didn't fire. The WEST VIRGINIA fired 16 salvos; the TENNESSEE, 13; the CALIFORNIA, 9; the PENNSYLVANIA, none. After the action, the MISSISSIPPI was reported to have had 189 rounds left; the MARYLAND, 192; the WEST VIRGINIA, 111; the TENNESSEE, 327; the CALIFORNIA, 213; the PENNSYLVANIA, 360. The PENNSYLVANIA fired no salvos at all, at Surigao, because they claimed they couldn't get on the target with the radars. The MISSISSIPPI got on, but there were two or three targets, and she kept shifting from one to the other and couldn't get on her finally selected target in time to have it count. She fired her only salvo to empty the guns. We had, at the end of the battle, an average of, roughly, twenty-two rounds per gun left in all of the battleships.

Now a battleship of the MARYLAND class, if my timing is right, fires about three salvos every two minutes. How about that, Admiral Hill?

ADMIRAL HILL: That is pretty fast.

CAPTAIN BATES: You can see it wouldn't take many minutes for the ammunition left in the battleships to be expended.

COLONEL HOWZE: You indicated that this battle was the greatest battle in naval history, but that perhaps, in the future, naval developments would go on, and possibly an even greater battle might occur. Would you expand on that and give us your idea of what that naval development will be?

CAPTAIN BATES: On the subject of naval development, I suppose you are getting as much as we are. What I meant by that was this: that we find in the War College that as we fight battles on the maneuver board, particularly in northern areas, there are long hours when planes can't fly at all. We ground them up there. Therefore, in view of the bad weather, for one thing, we feel it will happen, and could happen, that surface ships will be engaged. Now I know that a lot of people think that that is not so. I read something in one of General Kenney's lectures the other day in which he talked about how aircraft could now land and take off on snow or tundra; that the planes are now being designed for that; and that it would be possible to bring the logistic load in by air, and that the Air Force would be able to set up a base similar to that now provided by LST lifts. It is possible, of course, and perhaps it is coming, but despite these advancements, we don't feel yet that we do not need the surface ship and the guns. The conditions at present are such that planes, even with radar, may not be adequate or suitable for the problem. We have heard some complaint from various sources that maybe, at the War College, we ought not to go into surface ship actions at all. We can't subscribe to that. I am quite sure that Admiral Spruance doesn't subscribe to that. The more we study the areas, such as the Arctic, and any place where the weather conditions are bad, the more we feel the need for surface ships. It is true that as aircraft improves in quality, and as their weapons also

0328

improve, it gets tougher on the ships, which are longer lived. I think we can say, however, and I think most of our people up there feel--that is, both the students and the staff--that they do need their surface ships and their anti-aircraft guns.

We aren't sure about the missile gun. All experts who have been at the College, say that it is too far in the future. Push-button warfare is not in the cards today. We feel that we will fight, in the next few years, with the weapons of the past war, with certain improvements. We don't feel that the lessons of the last war are entirely valueless. We don't think there will be a great fleet action such as we used to prepare for before the war, with great opposing battle lines. Yet here at Surigao Strait occurred an action, fought along classic lines, which was a strictly Naval War College setup, and which worked out very well indeed, as you can see. So I don't know. I don't like to get into an argument on the thing. We don't want anyone to feel that, just because we won the last war, the weapons of that war are going to win the next one. We try to advance mentally. You and I must take the stand, as I said before, that the possibility of action between surface ships, maybe not a fleet action, but certainly with carrier task groups, and forces of that kind, are not remote, especially in the colder climates. Surface action could happen in other places also. I think that that is a pretty sound estimate of what we think right now.

GENERAL MATHENY: I still subscribe to the old theory that it takes two people to make an argument. What fleet are you going to stage this battle with?

CAPTAIN BATES: It is true that today there is not much of a Russian Fleet. Up there at the College we are always working with the Russians, but we are not figuring on today's war alone. We are figuring on a war in a few years, and we try to see what the Russians might build. In the last war, the Germans had a plan for a battleship of 120,000 tons. As they got nearer and nearer defeat, the ships planned got bigger and bigger. So these plans showed a form of hysteria in the minds of the Germans. How they were going to use this battleship, I don't know, but they evidently felt that with such a ship which was watertight, and which had a heavy concentration of guns, they had an effective weapon against almost anything.

At Newport, not long ago, we had the Head of the Air University as a speaker. He said that if the Germans had had the VT fuse, the Allied air attacks over Germany would have practically ceased. I talked to him about it afterwards. I said, "How do you feel about the guided missile against aircraft? Suppose you had a guided missile come in?" He said, "It is a field we haven't gotten into yet. We, at the Air University, are trying to find out what to do in such situations."

Gentlemen, we are all for the Flag, and we are all trying to find a common answer. Frankly, I have no feeling as to what weapons, ships, planes,^{or} ground troops we use for victory. If the submarines can win the war, let's build the submarine. If the air can do it, all right. At Surigao we didn't care who

0330

did it as long as the enemy ships were sunk. I take the same stand about every other weapon. I do feel, however, that we have to agree that in the last war we needed all the arms. At the beginning, some misguided souls thought they didn't need all arms, with the result that, in the end, we got a shortage of manpower. Near the end of the war there was talk in the Western Pacific of cutting down the Navy somewhat. The Assistant Secretary wanted to know what ^I was going to do with the PT boats, because of the shortage of manpower. He said that they needed the personnel for combat troops.

We all know that we couldn't dig the enemy out of the ground with guns and planes. We required foot soldiers for that. They had to go in and dig the enemy out with their bare hands.

As a matter of fact, after the attack on Wake in October, 1943, I wrote a letter (quite a strong letter), and pointed out that although the air had attacked all morning, when the cruisers came in, the whole coast opened up. The MINNEAPOLIS was straddled at eighteen thousand five hundred yards. The Japanese that day, were very poor in gunnery. They never hit us. God was on our team. At the end of the action, I wrote this letter and said that it was evident that the Japs had quit firing, but not, apparently, because of the guns or of the planes. They just quit; got tired. Therefore, my opinion was that, in landing in future operations, we would require all the air we could get, and all the surface ship gun power, but that even then, the Japs would be dug in, in such a way, that our losses of ground troops would be

0331

enormous. This would make the acceptability of the operation doubtful, but doubtful or not, we would have to take the losses anyway. That was before Tarawa.

General Kruger told me that he thought that the operations in the northwest of Leyte were the most remarkable operations in the war. His men were hanging on by their teeth. They infiltrated through the enemy lines. He thought he had a harder job there than the Marines had at Peleliu. As for the Navy, we couldn't help there except by air strikes. We could see that the plane and the gun couldn't rout the enemy out. Ground Troops were required for that. All that we wanted to do with our guns and planes was make it as easy as possible for the ground troops. In this connection, to save manpower, I recommended that we move across the Pacific as rapidly as possible, slowing down the European war, if necessary. I did this because I was afraid that the enemy would dig in and, to get them out, the cost would be almost prohibitive. Washington didn't do it, naturally, as the plan was the other way.

COLONEL HOWZE: I have the impression that the first accurate information that Admiral Oldendorf had of the attack was from the PT boats.

CAPTAIN BATES: That is correct. The first report we got, as I recollect--I do not recollect seeing it in the reports I have seen--the first thing reported was "two battleships." A little later they said "two destroyers."

I asked the PT command later, how it happened that they had called these destroyers "battleships", when they were destroyers. They said that the biggest ships they had seen before this were barges, and that when the destroyers came along, they seemed so awfully big, that they felt they must be battleships.

GENERAL GRUENTHER; I would like to ask a further question about air reconnaissance. Did the air reconnaissance pick up anything on that?

CAPTAIN BATES; No, the naval air reconnaissance picked up the Jap and he was attacked at 0905. There was no further information, that I can recollect, until the PT boats picked them up in the Mindanao Sea.

GENERAL GRUENTHER: Was the weather such that planes couldn't fly?

CAPTAIN BATES: No, the weather was all right. They made a search and didn't find them. These were naval planes. The naval planes had quite a time--I think you have already found that out--in San Bernardino Strait also, because the reports were during the night that the Center Force was going northwest, and then next going northeast, and Admiral Halsey didn't know which way they were going. Finally, he got the word, at a very bad time, that they were going northeast.

CAPTAIN EVENSON; Gentlemen, I am afraid our time is up. On behalf of the College I would like to thank you for a most interesting and instructive lecture. Thank you very much.

0333